Making Research Useful in Real-Time

Whole Communities–Whole Health Follow
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By Mike Mackert, Ph.D.

UT researchers walk through a neighborhood garden in Austin with local community groups in spring, 2018.

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From the first moment I heard about Bridging Barriers, UT's grand challenge initiative, I was excited. The UT Center for Health Communication is built on interdisciplinary partnerships across campus, and being part of a Bridging Barriers project would be another way to make important connections across the university for my own research and on behalf of our center.

I was invited to join the Whole Communities–Whole Health project after it was already underway, and I immediately fell in love with the core faculty team and the general premise: working in partnership with community members to rethink how we could do better **cohort studies**. It's about harnessing the benefits of big data and wearable devices to address problems that are important to the people we work with — and that means collaborating with communities to figure out what questions *they* have and what answers *they* need.

When scientists want to learn about a group of people, they design what's known as a **cohort study**. This is a way of observing similar people — a cohort — over time to learn about them.

The part of the project that was most exciting to me, though, was thinking about how to get data back to the community even as the project was happening. I've always tried to get important information back to community partners at the end of a project, but the idea of sharing data in real time with community members is a huge step forward in that kind of collaboration.

It shifts the model from "read an executive summary at the end of the project" or "read our extremely complicated research article in a journal a few years from now" to "here is all of the data we have RIGHT NOW." It makes it easier to see how a research project could actually contribute to improving people's health, which is one of the big reasons I like working in health communication to begin with. That's exciting!

The idea of sharing data in real time to participants is also an actual research project, of course. How should the data be shared? What makes the information more accessible? What kind of information is more likely to contribute to positive health changes, and how do people want to get that information? Once they have it, how can we help them use it? The list of research questions is virtually endless.

While this project is still in its earliest stages, I'm excited about the potential of what it can do, not only for the community members we'll be working with but also for how it could help researchers everywhere better share their data with their community partners — quickly and usefully.

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Healthcare Cohorts Community Engagement Research

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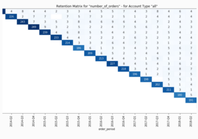

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